

Resilience of Tradition: Intangible Cultural Heritage Programs in Newfoundland and Labrador

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I am the Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. I work for the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL), and we work with various projects to promote, protect and preserve the culture of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The overall vision of our Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) strategy is to ensure that intangible cultural heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador is safeguarded as both a living heritage and is a source of contemporary creativity and to build bridges between diverse cultural groups.

In 2006, a document was produced, the cultural blueprint for Creative Newfoundland and Labrador. For the first time ICH became enshrined in official government policy. In 2006, we had a conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage and out of that grew a provincial strategy. And in 2008, the Heritage Foundation was chosen as the agency that would take over Intangible Cultural Heritage and move it forward.

The challenge for the Heritage Foundation and for me personally was to take a somewhat ambitious and nebulous strategy around this idea of Intangible Cultural Heritage and help safeguard living heritage. To take the intangible and somehow make it tangible, make it understandable and deliverable. And we have a rich heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador. We have a wide variety of cultural groups: settler groups and local indigenous Aboriginal populations. The strategy encompasses all of them, as well as new Canadians who have come to Newfoundland and Labrador.

The strategy has four goals: documentation, that idea that we need to document and record Intangible Cultural Heritage; the idea of celebration, that we need to elevate the discourse around Intangible Cultural Heritage to show that ICH has value in our communities; the idea of transmission, that we need to ensure that skills and knowledge move from one generation to another from one community to another community; and the idea that this must be based around some idea around cultural industry or sustainability -- that we need healthy, living communities in order for heritage to have meaning.

And so, how do we this? How do we take this strategy and turn it into action? I don't have time to tell you about all the programs that we run to revitalize tradition, but we do all kinds of different things. We encourage foolishness, we set things on fire and from time to time, we even consort with hookers. Those are rug hookers, who make traditional hooked rugs. I've been running the ICH program since 2008, but I've been working with the Heritage Foundation since 1995-1996, and Intangible Cultural Heritage is a new part of what we do with the Heritage Foundation.

The Heritage Foundation was established in 1984 and its original mandate had nothing to do with Intangible Cultural Heritage and a situation that sounds familiar to many of you. Our mandate was architectural heritage, the preservation of historic buildings. In a Western context, we have long thought about heritage as being about things. Many of the institutions that we work for in Canada were established to deal with objects or places. There are museums, archives, heritage, preservation societies.

And in a way, we know how to do that work. We know how to preserve things, objects, artifacts, documents, buildings, but all of these things have an intangible component that is just as important as the physical. At the Heritage Foundation, while we work on ICH projects that might seem to be purely cultural, traditions around Christmas mummering or bonfire night or craft traditions, we also are trying to find ways to bring together the two sides of the work that we do, to bring together the tangible and the intangible. That is what I'm going to focus on today as we talk about place, and how ICH is related to place.

ICH is based in communities; ICH happens at the community level, it grows out of places. So linking built heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage is not new, it's not even terribly difficult or as the introduction of this session in your program says daunting, it's not necessarily any of those things. Because ICH exists in and it is born from places. So this division that we might have in our heads about built heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage is not real, it is not a real division. Living communities, communities that are out there doing things, do not make a differentiation between built heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage, they just have heritage. That is the kind of work that we need to do.

For many of the projects that we work on, there is no line between place and culture. There is no line between tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage. I just want to give you a few examples of the types of projects that we have been working on since 2008 that specifically show how there is this flow, this kind of seamless flow between the built and the intangible.

Root cellars are one example, a part of our agricultural traditions in Newfoundland; they're an aspect of our vernacular architecture. They are a piece of our built heritage, but they stand as an embodiment of intangible ideas. They about where we store our food, how we store our food. There is a great deal of technical knowledge that goes into e root cellars. They can take a whole variety of forms. We don't have a lot of top soil, so most of our early houses didn't have basement cellars. So people needed another place to store their goods to over winter. And root cellars are a perfect example of that.

We started a project to do some research around root cellars and started a mapping project. We documented root cellars and we created an online map where people could participate if they had a root cellar; they could take a picture of it and they could put it on a map. We started to collect information about the physical characteristics, we came up with a typology of root cellar styles, the kind of things that architectural historians love. But we collected a lot of practical information about how people used root cellars and how they were used in the past but also in the present.

One the oldest cellars that we have in the province. was built as part of the John Guy's colony in Cooper Cove now Cupids. This cellar dates to 1611. And it was one of the first things that the English settlers did in that community Cupids, one of the oldest English speaking communities in Canada. And you go down the road a little bit in Cupids, you will come to Maureen Bishop's root cellar, constructed maybe four or five years ago.

What we have in Cupids is 400 years of living heritage that kind of exist cheek by jowl and a incredible body of knowledge that is specifically tied to place and technology and subsistence.

He held an event one week ago in Cupids. We brought people out, we took them to the archaeological site, I gave a presentation on the history of root cellars, another folkloris that I work with, Crystal Braye, gave a presentation on the work she'd done around the inventory, and then Maureen came and then we had a chat about potatoes.

This type project allows us to talk about vernacular architecture. It allows us to talk about living traditions, and it allows us to partner with other types of organizations that we might not think about as being heritage organizations. And one of the organizations that we have had great opportunity to work with with our root cellar project has been the Food Security Network. They're doing tremendous work around food security. They did a fabulous project a couple years ago where they went out and interviewed seniors in the community, collecting information about how seniors would have collected food, how they would have processed, or dried, or canned certain foods.

They essentially did an an ethnographic project, a documentary project around an aspect of intangible cultural heritage. Their objective was that people would go out and use this information. This is living heritage; this is not something that has happened in the past. These are things that we want people to continue to use into the future.

Another example of how small little aspects of our physical or tangible culture have intangible aspect, the lych gate. A lych gate is an often overlooked aspect of our religious architectural

history. A lych gate derived from the English word 'lic' meaning corpse is a gate, the entrance of a church yard, largely in the Anglican tradition, where the coffin would be rested as part of the funeral ceremony. And also sometimes, it will be incorporated in parts of wedding ceremonies. We did a research project around this, just to show how architecture and intangible cultural heritage are intricately linked.

So structures like this, or the Moravian Church dead houses in Labrador where bodies were stored before funerals, these structures become a part of the social landscape. They become part of a series of stories told about the land. They govern how people would move through the community. Movement, story, ritual, place, and buildings are all completely interwoven, intangible cultural heritage and built heritage side by side.

Another example is a hay barrack, a type of again agricultural building, a semi-temporary building for the storage of hay. It was once very popular in Atlantic Canada, but has died out in Newfoundland, though there are places in Atlantic Canada where these are still used. Agricultural buildings like this in many of our rural communities provide an excellent place where we can start to have conversations about that link between the tangible and the intangible. So it might be a root cellar, it might be a hay barrack, it might be a drive shed, it might be a dairy, it might be a well.

We did an entire project around wells and springs in Newfoundland. There was a pot of money that came available through RBC for doing water based research. All the money was going towards scientists who were doing environmental studies around water. We applied with Dr. Philip Hiscock of the Memorial University Department of Folklore and we did a project around traditional knowledge of wells and springs. In rural Newfoundland, even when town water is available, a surprisingly large number of people rely on wells. And in many ways, wells are some of the oldest pieces of built heritage that we have in settler communities. Some of them are quite, quite old indeed.

There is an incredible amount of knowledge that surrounds wells and how wells are used, concepts around water cleanliness and community participation. It was a project around physical places but it was also a project around concepts of resource management. So it was a tangible and intangible project.

One of the other projects I wanted to talk about is our heritage districts programs. I am sure many of you who deal with buildings have heritage districts program. In the past, when we designated either an individual building or a provincial historic district, we put up a plaque noting its architectural and historic importance and then we walked away. And we often times had very little to do with that site or with the community. We did not have a lot of involvement with the community after the designation process.

Today, I would like to think that we are starting to change that and we are rethinking our strategy, rethinking our relationship with townscapes and the people who live in them. Our strategy for dealing with heritage districts has transformed into something much more fluid, more organic,

and more responsive to the needs and desires of the people who live and administrate in the district. And our approach with districts is pretty much the same as it is with other intangible cultural heritage projects, projects surrounding customs or traditional skills or knowledge. We conduct research, we assess local needs, and we develop public programs around those needs.

One district that we worked in is located in the town of Heart's Content. One of my colleagues, folklorist Lisa Wilson, conducted hours of oral history research in the district, and undertook community photograph and geo-spatial memory mapping with residents in the district. In Heart's Content, physical spaces within the community exist in a natural harmony with intangible cultural heritage -- spaces where a local rug hooking guild might meet, places where Newfoundland square dancing might take place, where traditional games are played, and where sheep might graze until they're ready to be shorn. The end product was a booklet of local stories launched as part of our registered heritage district plaque unveiling, intangible and tangible taking equal importance.

The district work also resulted in an online story map, YouTube videos, blog entries, digital archive of ethnographic interviews, as well as a set of grassroots recommendations and observations about what the community wish to see happen in the district, which was then handed back. These recommendations included things about tangible assets but also about intangible assets as well.

In another district, Bay Roberts, we did a similar project; the people of Bay Roberts wanted a different project. So in the end instead of a booklet, we had a birthday party for Cable Avenue and we developed a museum exhibit with audio clips from oral histories.

The final project that I just want to talk about is our fishery's heritage preservation program. The Heritage Foundation was established to designate and provide grants to heritage buildings. We designated a lot of buildings; we gave a lot of grant money to churches and merchant houses and lodges, beautiful Queen Anne style mansions, and as we were doing all of that, the moratorium on the cod fishery took place and all of the vernacular types of buildings involved in the inshore cod fishery, the buildings that define the look of Newfoundland and Labrador, started to disappear.

We created a small grant program for tangible heritage, for fisheries heritage. These types of buildings that might never ever be designated or provided with grant restoration funding. Since that program has started, we have worked in over 40 communities. We have helped repair and restore hundreds of fishing stages. While that happens, what is also preserved is the knowledge and skills around the maintenance of these buildings. These are not buildings being repaired by contractors; they are buildings that are being repaired by fisherman and their families. So now not only are we keeping the buildings on the landscape, but we're maintaining traditional skills around building construction.

We are expanding this project. We want to go one step further.

We have taken some of the money from the grant stream and we have directed it into intangible cultural heritage projects around the fishery. We have three projects that we're going to be

working on over the next couple of months. The first one is from the town of Pouch Cove, a research project around cod liver oil factories. They will be documenting where these buildings existed in the community, they are going to collect stories, and will hopefully be working with Chris Brookes, a radio documentary producer, and creating a GPS located iPhone app based on cod liver oil stories from the town of Pouch Cove.

We are going to be funding a special issue of Them Days magazine, a magazine published out of Labrador. It will be a specific article just on the Labrador fishery, bringing in both Aboriginal and settler stories about the historic fishery in Labrador.

The last project is back in the community of Cupids, where the local cultural centre is going to do a cultural mapping project around place names, and intangible knowledge around marks and navigation -- the landmarks that fisherman would use to know where they were in relation to certain traps and fishing grounds.

You can take an object and you can put it in a museum, but it is very difficult to put a body of knowledge or a cultural process in a museum. Therefore, we need to develop safeguarding programs to ensure the flow of cultural information.

I was talking with our colleagues from Saskatchewan earlier, and they were talking about how they are shifting from stuff to stories. I love that idea, that we are moving from stuff to stories. I would add skills in there as well, to find ways to take the stuff that happens from the past, help it live in the present and move it forward into the future.

Thank you very much.

- Dale Jarvis